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Relindial: the birth of a new IFLA SIG

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Silvano Danieli and Mauro Guerrini

1. Relindial: The Birth of a New IFLA SIG

Abstract: The paper describes the birth and early development of the IFLA Special Interest Group on Religious Libraries in Dialogue from the initial ideas in Italy in 2007, through the first discussions at the IFLA World Library and Information congress in Milan in 2009, to the official approval formally establishing the Group in 2012. Regional and international bodies around the world were contacted for their support. The Group recognizes the special role that faiths have played in the development of world cultures and seeks to promote dialogue among libraries which embody those faiths.

Rèsumé: L'article décrit la naissance et les premiers développements du Groupe d'Intérêt Spécialisé IFLA sur les bibliothèques religieuses en dialogue, depuis l'idée initiale en 2007 en Italie, puis à travers les premières discussions à l'occasion du Congrès mondial des bibliothèques et de l'information à Milan en 2009, jusqu'à l'acceptation officielle qui a permis d'établir officiellement le groupe en 2012. Le soutien d'organisations régionales et internationales tout autour du monde a été sollicité. Le groupe Relindial fait état du rôle particulier que les religions ont joué dans le développement des cultures du monde. Il cherche à promouvoir le dialogue entre les bibliothèques qui incarnent ces religions.

1.1 Introduction

Participants in the 75th Congress of IFLA – the International Federation of Library Associations – in Milan, 23–28 August 2009, felt it was time to launch a project whose scope and purpose could best be described by the acronym RELINDIAL (Religious Library Intercultural Dialogue). On that occasion at the suggestion and insistence of the President of the Associazione italiana biblioteche (AIB) and coordinator of IFLA's Italian committee, one day was devoted to “religious libraries”. The theme of this day was “Babel, Bible and Koran: from text to context. From background cultures to sacred books: the modern functions of libraries in

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the religious traditions of Mediterranean civilizations”.¹ There was much interest and willingness to take part in this project.

1.2 Opening a New IFLA SIG (Special Interest Group)

Between December 2008 and July 2009, Mauro Guerrini and members of IFLA's Governing Board – Anna Maria Tammaro (IFLA Professional Committee, Division IV) and Steve W. Witt (IFLA Professional Committee, Division II) – were in contact several times. They arranged the necessary discussions to be included in the IFLA congress official programme. The committee involved in making this project a reality included Mauro Guerrini (University of Florence, President of the AIB and President of the IFLA Italian Committee 2009), Pier Francesco Fumagalli (Vice-prefect of the Ambrosian Library), Fausto Ruggeri (Secretary of ABEI, the Association of Italian Ecclesiastical Librarians) and Silvano Danieli (Director of URBE, the Unione Romana Biblioteche Ecclesiastiche Board of Directors). As early as September 2007 a meeting took place between the President of AIB and Mgr Stefano Russo, who is in charge of the National Office for Ecclesiastical Property of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI). The meeting discussed the possibility of including the CEI in an effort to promote involvement of ecclesiastical libraries on a national level. In a second meeting (19 June 2008), it was decided that ABEI would promote this project. Subsequently the Committee met on January 14 and May 14, 2009 to plan and organize the event, which was made possible through the sponsorship of the CEI and the ABEI. All the documentation produced for this event can be found in the URBE archives.²

¹ Silvano Danieli and Mauro Guerrini, eds. *Babele, Bibbia e Corano: dal testo al contesto. Dalle culture ai libri di culto: funzioni moderne delle biblioteche nelle tradizioni religiose delle civiltà del mediterraneo* (Babel, Bible and Kor'an: From texts to contexts. From cultures to sacred books: Modern functions of libraries in the religious traditions of Mediterranean civilization]. (Roma: CEI, 2010). The papers included in the proceedings were published in their original language along with English.

² URBE. Unione Romana Biblioteche Ecclesiastiche (Roma, “Casa Paolo VI”, Via della Scrofa, 70). Cf. *Bollettino d'Informazione ABEI* a. 17:3 (2008) 10, 14; a. 18:2 (2009) 23-25, 11 and 18:3 (2009) 3-4; *Biblioteche oggi* 27 6 (2009) 67.

1.3 From the Idea to the Opening

An offsite session was held at the Ambrosian Library of Milan on 24 August 2009. After introductory words from Milan's Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi, Steve Witt and Mauro Guerrini, the speakers were Professor Malachi Bei-Arié, lecturer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Cesare Pasini, Prefect of the Vatican Apostolic Library, and Gabriele Mandel Khan, Vicar General in Italy of the Sufi Jerrahi-Halveti Confraternity. During the afternoon representatives of six European associations of religious libraries joined the discussion.

It would have been pointless not to take advantage of all the work and commitment involved in preparation for this event. Immediately after the Milan Congress the present authors gathered all the material necessary for publishing the proceedings and sought to interest others in a possibility of setting up a special section of IFLA devoted to religious libraries.

During the informal moments of this first satellite session on 24 August, Odile Dupont was asked to open a Special Interest Group of libraries so that religious libraries serving interfaith dialogue could have their own group and collaborate through IFLA. She accepted this proposal for numerous reasons: as president of BETH (Bibliothèques Européennes de Théologie), facilitating networking was one way of fulfilling one of her most important duties within BETH. The Institut Catholique of Paris, in which she was librarian, is an important place of reflection on interfaith dialogue: this new task seemed to be consistent with her institution. The third reason was personal: three different cultures were already present in her family.

But the main reason was how obvious it is that a good knowledge of the other cultures is a good way to promote peace all over the world, and libraries have a role to play in addressing this challenge. All these elements seemed work together.

With determination, courage and persistence, Odile Dupont brought this first very important stage of the project to a successful conclusion.

1.4 First Exploratory Developments

1.4.1 Year 2009–2010

During the first year, a lot of contacts were made to introduce the project and receive advice from experienced people:

- Father François Bousquet, vice-rector for research at the Institut Catholique de Paris (the Catholic University of Paris), specialist in interreligious dialogue, and member of the International Commission for Peace Research within UNESCO, gave encouragement to create the SIG and obtained the institutional approval of his university;
- Steve W. Witt, president of the IFLA Division for Libraries Types, gave guidance on the main steps to be taken to succeed with IFLA;
- Bibliothèque nationale de France: Christiane Baryla, IFLA-PAC director, institutional member of UNESCO Memory of the World National Committee in France, and Christophe Langlois, head librarian of the Service philosophie, religion in the BnF, agreed to support the project.

Mails were sent to the presidents of continental theological library associations and to some librarians involved in international collaboration within these associations:

- ATLA (American Theological Library Association): the Executive Director, Dennis Norlin, and the President of the International Cooperation Committee within ATLA, Paul Stuehrenberg;
- ForATL (Forum of Asian Theological Libraries): the President Elizabeth Pulanco and the Secretary Christabel Wong;
- ITLA (Indian Theological Library Association): the President Chacko Chacko and the Secretary Yesan Sellan;
- ANTZLA (Australian and New Zealand Theological Library Association): the President Philip Harvey;
- BETH (Bibliothèques européennes de théologie);

Information was shared with other international and academic associations

- FIUC (International Federation of Catholic Universities);
- COCTI Conference of Catholic Theological Institutions);
- WCC (World Council of Churches);

In Islamic countries, messages were sent to:

- BOB (Bibliothèque Orientale de Beyrouth): the Director, May Semaan;
- IDEO (Institut Dominicain d'Etudes Orientales) in Cairo: Father Régis Morelon;
- BNRM (Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc): M. Driss Khrouz, Executive Director and his wife, Anne Balenghien, who are deeply involved in Muslim-Christian dialogue in Morocco, expressed their interest.

1.4.2 Exploratory Meeting IFLA 2010 Gothenburg

An exploratory meeting was organized in Gothenburg on Tuesday 10 August 2010, attended by:

- Odile Dupont, who supported the project for a SIG;
- Steven Witt, chair of the IFLA Division for Library Types;
- Prof. Mauro Guerrini, University of Florence;
- Amélie Valloton, documentalist in Globethics.net, Geneva, Switzerland;
- Margareth Tarpley member till 2009 of the International Cooperation Committee of ATLA;
- D’Anna Schotts Baptist seminary, Nigeria, librarian member of ATLA;
- Carisse Berryhill, Abilene Christian University, member of the Standing Committee of ATLA.

Apologies were received from Christiane Baryla, Chair of IFLA-PAC.

After having received the first advice on the creation of a Special Interest Group IFLA from Steve Witt, a reading of the foundation of the proposal was given:

“Convinced that an in-depth dialogue between cultures has to be done in truth and in freedom, we think that this dialogue must involve the religions that have built the roots of the cultures of the world; convinced that this dialogue is more and more necessary because of the growing number of international and intercultural exchanges and because of the great proportion of displaced populations, we want to create, within the IFLA, a special libraries group, to serve the dialogue between religion and cultures.”

Then the attendees were given the names of people, associations of libraries and special libraries who had expressed their interest in the project during the last few months. Almost all continents were represented: Europe, North America, Africa, Middle East, Asia and Australasia.

The topics under consideration for study by the SIG and the way of organization were listed. After this reading, the different attendees showed how the proposal for a SIG could join their own activities and help develop them. Then Steve Witt explained the machinery of the IFLA for creating such a group, first of all finding a specific section host to support our activities. Looking over the possibilities, he thought that the Academic and Research Libraries or Social Science Libraries sections could be convenient. Steve Witt proposed to approach Lynne Rudasill, working in the same university as he, as the chair of the Social Science Libraries section. Odile Dupont and Lynne Rudasill could meet two days after the exploratory meeting, and the idea of hosting the new SIG RE-LINDIAL in the

Social Sciences Library Section was accepted. We had still to obtain the vote of the Standing Committee the year after.

1.4.3 Years 2010–2012

Odile Dupont was then elected to the Standing Committee of the Social Science Library Section.

A new meeting took place in Rome, 24 March 2011. The first Standing Committee of the Social Science Libraries during the IFLA World Library and Information Congress in Puerto Rico in 2011 gave approval for hosting the new SIG RELINDIAL on 13 August 2011. An application was made to the IFLA Professional Committee on 18 August 2011. The request concluding the first meeting of the Professional Committee was to create an Advisory Committee. This committee was established, composed of experienced personalities of IFLA or religious libraries or interfaith dialogue:

- Lynne Rudasill, IFLA Governing Board, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign;
- Hermann Roesch, IFLA-FAIFE (Committee on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression), LIS Professor, Cologne University of Applied Sciences;
- Christophe Langlois, Catholic University of Paris, director of the libraries;
- Mgr François Bousquet, member of the International Commission of Peace Research of UNESCO;
- Driss Khrouz, director of the Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc;

On April 3, 2012, Odile Dupont wrote to Father Silvano Danieli: “Cher Père, j’ai la grande joie de vous annoncer que le projet RELINDIAL a été approuvé par l’IFLA hier matin”. Odile Dupont had guided this project with persistence and seriousness. RELINDIAL could commence.

1.5 Aim of RELINDIAL

Religious libraries have finally found a voice in IFLA, the international association that promotes respect for the ideals of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in every nation of the world. Religious libraries have the far from easy task of creating a future that is open to dialogue, sharing and peace. Through books, religious libraries preserve and make available the “sacred wisdom” of the

centuries. The existence of such libraries teaches us that books are not the property of any single individual – they belong to us all and can enrich everyone’s understanding.

1.6 A Prestigious Heritage of Interwoven Cultures Serving Beauty and Wisdom

As further evidence of the value and purpose of religious libraries in twenty-first century culture we would cite the words of Mgr Fumagalli (Vice-prefect of the Ambrosian Library of Milan) found in the Afterword of the published proceedings.³ Our vision draws inspiration from the past to preserve its treasure and to help every man understand what that treasure contains.

At the root of the three Abrahamic monotheist traditions of Mediterranean culture – Jewish, Christian, Arabic-Islamic – there are three books: the Torah, the Gospel and the Koran, the work of Moses, Jesus and Mohammed, founders of the three faith communities – Israel, the Church and the Umma. These three texts are rooted in the millennial traditions of Word and Wisdom, Davar and Khokmà, proclamation and writing, law and social praxis. Society and civilization, science and faith, art and literatures are all interconnected from the very beginning of these ancient religions. This phenomenon is not limited to the Near East and the Mediterranean; it can be found in places far removed, India and China, where the sacred stroke of the brush – the “religion of the written sign” – evokes shamanist insights and syntheses of cosmic and civilized concepts that could be expressed by the Chinese ideogram wén huà – a melting pot of Confucian humanism, Taoist mysticism, alchemic research and Buddhist compassion.

There is a mysterious echo – possibly not by accident – that reflects ancient and profound links between “Biblia” and “Bab-ili” (God’s Gate) – the original Akkadian name of Babylon. According to Giovanni Pettinato this is symbolically the primordial city, the “Pearl of Kingdoms and the *umbellicus mundi* (centre of the earth)”.⁴ From Hammurabi to Nebuchadnezzar it is where peoples and cultures meet. Here Etemenanki, the Tower of Babel, the headquarters and symbol of mathematics and astronomy consecrated by sacrifice to Marduk, the seat of political authority, the proud splendour of the Chaldeans was overthrown. The civil and legal procedures found in Hammurabi’s Code are reflected in the Mosaic

³ Danieli and Guerrini, *Babele, Bibbia e Corano*, 277-279.

⁴ Giovanni Pettinato, *Babilonia: Centro dell’Universo* (Milano: Rusconi, 1994).

Holiness Code, the basis of God's pact with Israel, where Torah and Law, norm and ethical imperative, spirit and letter are welded together.

The first elements of the Hebrew alphabet (long believed of divine origin) were forged in this melting pot where the civilizations of the Fertile Crescent (Mesopotamia, Palestine, Egypt of the Pharaohs) met in dialogue, commerce, war and peace. This Hebrew alphabet was the mother of Phoenician, Greek, Arabic and through Aramaic of Sanskrit and Tibetan as well.

The *Sifrê Qodesh* (Books of Holiness) – later called simply “books”, “Biblia” or in Arabic “Kitāb”, like those found at Qumran in 1948, bear witness to veneration for, and love of books which were the expression of transcendent values and the product of human culture. A similar passion can be found in the Greek and Roman classical world. In that world's encounter with the proclamation of Christ's Gospel we witness tension between the eternal values of Judaism and the values of contemporary civilization. Early Arabic-Islamic civilization puts a book at the origin of knowledge and faith.

Throughout the whole Mediterranean and Near East the libraries of Pergamon, Athens, Rome, the Jerusalem Temple (Beit ha-Miqdash), Baghdad (Bayt al-Hikma), Alexandria and Constantinople became centres, emblems and models of love for the Beautiful and the True.

1.7 A Legacy to be Conserved and Passed Down

“In the global and dynamic context of inter-cultural relations the observation of Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, the German sinologist and historian, is especially apropos: ‘Questions and insights on value and meaning are of the utmost importance in a world that has been undergoing dramatic change for so long – change that will continue well into the future. This is a world in which possibilities, interests, goals, judgments of risk or opportunity are a source of constant friction and yet cannot be separated from each other.’ It is today especially urgent and necessary that we create a society that serves all, a new society conceived in justice and truth. From an overview of the great cultures and religions of the world – India, China, Europe, Africa, America, Australia – we appear to be on the threshold of a new renaissance based on shared values.”⁵

⁵ Danieli and Guerrini, *Babele, Bibbia e Corano*, 289.

The purpose of RELINDIAL is to promote and share these universal values. May every library that keeps the treasures of every faith and creed become the final “refuge” for men who seek a reason and hope for their own existences.